The Role of Inter-religious Education in Fostering Peace and Development

Eunice Karanja Kamaara

Introduction

In spite of human advancements in many spheres of life, the world is largely characterized by violence. War and conflict remain the major threats to human life and development today: domestic violence, ethnic clashes, civil wars, international war and terrorism dot the globe. Against this background, humans of goodwill seek solutions towards controlling conflict and fostering peace.

Any effective solution to an undesirable situation or any attempts to maintain a desirable situation demand an analysis of the situation to determine its root causes. Otherwise, what may be seen as solutions may only serve to suppress the symptoms and therefore may appear to work but only for a short while. Later, the undesirable situation could blow out with serious implications for human life.

Therefore, in seeking to foster peace in a context as characterized by violence as the contemporary world, it is necessary to establish the root causes of violence. This chapter propounds the argument that violence in the world today has root causes in religion. This is because religion is like a double-edged sword: although all world religions claim to uphold peace and justice, they are heavily associated with conflict and violence. The first section of this chapter presents this double-edged nature of religion.

Sociologists, psychoanalysts, naturalists and other scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century predicted that religion would become obsolete and consequently extinct with the scientific and technological advancements of humankind. This is yet to happen and there are no indications that it will happen in the near future. Religion continues to be a major influence on human behaviour. In this context, we focus on religion and violence. Religion simply refers to a set of human beliefs and practices related to a supernatural being or forces. Violence refers to the

E.K. Kamaara (✉)
Moi University, Eldoret, Kenya
e-mail: eunkamaara@yahoo.com

absence of peace and security. It includes both active conflict (war) and latent conflict among human beings so that the absence of war does not necessarily constitute peace.

Religion is often the source of violence in many situations. In others, it is the basis of violence. Yet in others, it is used to justify violence. The following section presents illustrations from various parts of the world to show the role played by religion in initiating and perpetuating violence at all levels. This will guide us into the next section which is on the need for inter-religious education for peace and development in the world today. The major conclusion is that sharpening the right edge of religion through inter-religious education is an effective strategy towards the much desired peace and development in the contemporary world.

Religion as a Double-Edged Sword: The Functions and Dysfunctions of Religion in Society

Compared with other human institutions, such as the family, which ensures perpetuation of life through reproduction and socialization, and economic institutions, which ensure production, maintenance and distribution of resources, religion, with its concern with the intangible beyond, seems irrelevant to human life. This appears more so especially in the face of scientific and technological advancements. However, this is only an appearance. In reality, religion remains an indispensable institution. From an African perspective, everybody is religious because to be born and to live is to be religious. (Mbiti, 1969)

According to functionalism, society is made up of complex institutions which, as a whole, constitute the social system (O'Dea & O'Dea, 1993). If an institution loses its functions, it ceases to exist. Religion remains unabated in spite of earlier predictions that it would die with modern scientific and technological developments. This implies that religion is still functional. O'Dea and O'Dea (1993, p. 3) observe that religion has been described as

> ... something unimportant and evanescent, something peripheral to the genuine business of human life. Yet, the facts point to something else.... Religion has been characterized as embodying the most sublime of human aspirations; as being a bulwark of morality, a source of public order and inner individual peace; as ennobling and civilizing in its effects upon (hu)mankind. It has also been accused of being a stubborn obstacle retarding progress and promoting fanaticism and intolerance, ignorance, superstition, and obscurantism. The record reveals religion to be among the strongest buttresses of an established social order. It also however, shows it is capable of exhibiting profound revolutionary tendencies, as in the peasant war in the sixteenth century Germany.

O'dea and O'dea seem contradictory in their observation but this presents reality. Such are the contradictions of religion in real life.

One of the major functions of religion in society is provision of moral guidance. Consequently, it provides a major source of public order and peace. Yet, the majority of the various acts of war and violence in the world are acts of religion, based on

religion, justified by religion, or heavily associated with religion. No wonder, as observed by Priestley (2007, p. 30):

> It is hardly surprising, then, that for many people in our world today, the words and the claims of religion are seen as offensively hypocritical. For in many instances, it appears that religions, far from seeking peace are the progenitors of war, with the result that the secular world sees in us only hypocrisy of a high order. To face ourselves, we have to admit but not be overwhelmed by this for there is plenty of hypocrisy in the secular world as well.

All major world religions condemn violence and uphold peace and justice as their hallmark. Yet, suffice to emphasize that majority of violent situations in the world are initiated and/or justified, maintained and perpetuated by religion. The following section presents illustrations of the role of religion in violence in various parts of the world.

Religion and Violence Across the World

Introduction

As has already been indicated, various parts of the world are characterized by various forms of violence. In this section, we present some forms of violence manifested in historical events at the international, national, community and family levels to illustrate the close relationship between religion and violence.

Violence Justified by Religion

Various forms of violence are perpetuated by religious justifications. The best illustration of these is probably violence within the family. While the family is expected to provide love and security to individuals, it is one of the most brutal institutions. All forms of violence occur within it. Violence against children in such forms as child labour, child battering and child sexual abuse prevails all over the world. Moreover, one of the major forms of violence all over the world, gender violence, is mostly manifested at this same institution. In this section, we focus on how violence against men and women in the family is justified by religion.

Gender violence is especially manifested at the family level though it is not limited to it. On the basis of their sex, women are generally discriminated against in terms of access to, control over and ownership of resources and processes. To justify this discrimination, specific gender attributes, roles, characteristics and stereotypes are socially constructed. For example, women are said to be physically and emotionally weak and therefore positions of power and decision-making may not be entrusted to them.

To maintain the situation of male dominance, gender violence is expressed in sexual violence, psychological violence, social, economic and/or physical violence. ECA-WIDNET (1971, p. 15) observes that physical violence is administered 'to

maintain women in a dependent and submissive state' and so is sexual and psychological violence. Gender violence results from individual or group pursuits of interests at the expense of other individuals or groups. In sexual violence for example, male sexual needs are met at the expense of female sexual needs, while in social violence men's needs for social empowerment are met at the expense of women.

Men too have been violated on the basis of their sex especially, ironically, with the development of the so-called gender empowerment programmes. Gender violence has been associated, with adequate reasons, to violence against women and various attempts to address it have been made. However, these have had counter-effects resulting in further gender violence albeit of a different form. Gender empowerment programmes all over the world have continually focused on the economic empowerment of women. This may be justified because traditionally, it is women who have been marginalized and therefore attempts to redress the situation must favour women. However, such empowerment has sometimes been at the expense of men. As women are empowered economically, they take up what were traditionally male gender roles without dropping any of their traditionally female gender roles. For example, many women especially in Africa have become the breadwinners and home builders of their families, two major roles that were traditionally male, but they continue to play their roles as homemakers and caregivers.

Unfortunately, while there are social systems supporting women to take up traditional male gender roles, there are no such systems to support men to take up traditional female gender roles. Men require a lot of courage to engage in such activities as domestic chores and child caring as traditional social norms which do not expect them to do such have remained largely unchanged. This means that as women take up traditional male gender roles, many men are left with no responsibilities at the family level. This is a dangerous situation for any human being to find himself/herself in because it erodes one's value and esteem. Research by Silberschmidt (1999) among the Kisii of western Kenya, for example, supports this view. To compensate for loss of self-value and esteem, some men become careless, irresponsible and aggressive with many of them resorting to alcoholism and drug abuse. This has led to gender antagonism and increased gender violence.

Religion plays a major role as a source, basis and justification for gender violence. Many of the major religions of the world seem to endorse the idea and practice of male dominance. This is clearly manifested in that many of them do not have women in leadership and decision-making positions. At their worst, religions seem to be the source of patriarchy. For example, Christianity has presented to the world a male God and a subordinationist view of women. Male characters in the Bible hold traditional male gender roles which are dominant, while women hold traditional female gender roles which are characterized by submission and subordination. This presentation may be understood because the Bible was written, canonized, translated and interpreted by men from patriarchal societies. However, understanding this does not mean upholding it but rather demand just reinterpretations of the Bible. This implies that religious education is critical for peace and development today. Critical analysis of the Bible, for example, reveals that the scripture has a liberationist view

as well. For example, while many female characters in the Bible play subordinate roles in the salvation history, other female characters, like Mary the mother of God, are central to the history.

The Bible is also used to justify violence against men in the name of the liberation of women. Some radical feminist theologians draw from the Bible to exaggerate the revolutionary character of Jesus. Hence, they advocate for separation of men and women to the point of recommending lesbianism at the expense of the family unit. The story of Joanna the wife of Herod's steward, Chuza, and other women who followed and supported Jesus as he travelled from one town and one village to the other in his evangelization mission. As Ann Brown indicates: '. . . Joanna, one of these mentioned came from Herod's court, the very seat of the opposition to Jesus, and her husband was a senior official. Yet, she identified herself with a man who was regarded as a state traitor'(Brown, 1991, p. 138).

Such radical theologians will quote scriptural verses on the need to fight evil at whatever costs without appreciating that social living requires a great deal of sacrifice on the part of individuals. However, this must not be construed to mean that women and only women must sacrifice for family peace and unity. Self-sacrifice has been presented in many religions as a prerogative for women. It is not. Self-sacrificing servant-hood is a calling for all human beings interested in peace and development.

Without any contradiction, it seems necessary to point out that on many occasions, women have obediently listened to religious leaders who push them to self-sacrifice for the sake of their families even where there is no reciprocity from their husbands. This is not the way to peace. As one psycho-biologist, Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen (1990, p. 46), observed:

> If women insist on peace at any price – if they settle for abnormal quietism as a way of avoiding the risk and potential isolation that may result from opposing evil – they are not exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit. They are sinning just as surely as the man who rides roughshod over relationships in order to assert individual freedom. For 'peace' in the Biblical sense does not consist of 'peace at any price'. It is rather shalom in that all things are in their rightful, creationally ordained place. And in the light of the Fall, the distortion of Shalom – including that between men and women calls for a prophetic refusal to say "peace, peace when there is no peace" (Jeremiah 6: 14) and willingness to makes changes needed to restore the true shalom.

Christian religious education enables one to understand the need to strike a balance between self-sacrifice and the struggle for peace.

However, Christian religious education on its own is not adequate. It is important to study other religions alongside Christianity in order to establish whether it is all religions that seem to have such contradictory views which are interpreted to justify gender violence. Such study would then lead one to understand that the use of religion to found or justify gender violence is common in all religions even though it has no basis. This would then help one to understand that gender violence has its root in patriarchy rather than in religion. Religion is always expressed through cultural media and therefore what is found in cultures across the world may be found in religions across the world. Consequently, one would be well placed to question

religious justification of gender violence and to act appropriately against it even as one considers the need for self-sacrifice for peace and harmony in society.

Inter-religious education allows one to have different perspectives on addressing gender violence for peace and development. If one were to use only one religion to argue that religion is inappropriately used to justify gender violence, such an argument may be dismissed as being specific to that one religion.

Religion as a Form of Violence

Religion has itself been a form of violence in various communities (McTernan, 2003). Perhaps it would be kind to refer to this as 'violence in the name of religion' rather than 'religion as violence'. Some people would argue that religion is in itself good but believers of religion can abuse religion leading to violence. Whichever way we refer to it, the truth is that it is not always easy to differentiate between a religion and its adherents.

Through history, a number of illustrations of religion as conflict in itself exist. For want of space we will limit ourselves to one illustration – the Kanugu saga. On March 17, 2000, members of The Movement of the Restoration of the Ten Commandments based in Kanugu, Uganda, woke up to a new day as usual. Kampala (2000, p. 41):

> Many members entered their church for their daily morning prayers. Before this the leaders had told all members of the movement that they would be locked in the church to pray and Mary {the Virgin Mother of God} would personally come in flames of fire to take them to heaven. The significance of this 'locking' was so that only those inside would be delivered while those outside would be destroyed. The locking also implied prevention from any escape. Every member was urged to enter the church apart from one seventeen year old boy, Peter Ahimbisibwe, who left early that morning to look for food. About 10.30 a.m. a big blast was heard at the camp. Fire broke out in the church and a big black smoke was seen by the people in the neighbourhood as they gathered at the place. Much screaming was heard from inside the church for about five minutes. Over five hundred people are believed to have perished in the fire and their remains were buried in a mass grave located at the site.

To date nobody knows whether the members of this church committed suicide, were murdered or were saved as they had been promised by their leaders. If they were saved, we have no way of knowing though that is so violent a way of salvation that few people would opt for it. Whether they were murdered or they committed suicide or they were even saved, the point is clear that religion acted violently against its own members. Individuals violated themselves either into suicide or into salvation or their leaders violated them to death in the name of religion. The result was human suffering and loss of many lives.

One may want to dismiss this as the work of a 'cult in Africa' and therefore not worthy to be cited as an illustration of religious activity, but such dismissal may not be justified for the following two reasons. First, cults emerge out of frustrations and/or dissatisfactions with religion. In this case, the Kanugu cult broke away from the Roman Catholic Church, hence the movement's idea of salvation through the

Virgin Mary. Second, there is no other force other than religion that would drive people to such naivety and folly as to allow oneself to be locked in a room to await salvation through flames of fire! One may want to call it religious fundamentalism or religious folly but whatever we call it, it amounts to religious violence.

Suffice to mention that cults with similar tendencies that have led to loss of human lives and property have been reported across the world including in highly secular places like Europe and America. If cults are disputed as not being religious activities, one may illustrate the point with what may not be disputed as a religion – the active violence that continues to manifest itself between Roman Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland.

In the name of religion, humans have been violated or violated themselves throughout history. It is therefore through religion that such violence may be controlled. Inter-religious education provides an understanding that religious cults emerge in all religions and of why they emerge. Such understanding is necessary in controlling religious violence of the afore-discussed kind. Moreover, inter-religious education could foster peace within and among religions as it promotes appreciation and respect of the other.

Religion as a Basis for Civil and Ethnic Wars

In August 2007, this writer was privileged and honoured to serve as a member of the Living Letters Team sent on a pastoral visit by the World Council of Churches (WCC) to Sri Lanka. This was first of the Living Letters visits to world churches operating in situations of conflict, in the context of the Decade to Overcome Violence of the WCC. The visits are meant to strengthen the work of the churches for reconciliation and peace and to be a symbol of the solidarity of the churches around the world. At the same time the visits were designed to give content to the proposed Declaration on Just Peace and to prepare the churches for their participation in the International Ecumenical Peace Convocation planned by the WCC for 2011. The experience gained from the visit provided a perfect illustration of ethnic violence that is so closely related to religion that one cannot be sure whether religion or ethnicity is responsible for the violence. I share part of this experience in the proceeding paragraphs extracted from the report of the Living Letters Team to Sri Lanka.[1]

Historically, there has been both Indo-Aryan emigration from India which forms the largest ethnic group in Sri Lanka today – the Sinhalese (74%); and of Tamils, the second-largest ethnic group (18%), originally from the Tamil region of India. The Sinhalese and Tamil populations have at different moments of history coexisted peacefully but have also had conflicts. The Tamils, primarily Hindus, claimed the

---

[1]See http://www.2.wcc-coe.org/pressreleasesen.nsf/index/pr-07-51.html and also:
http://www.oikoumene.org/en/news/news-management/all-news-english/display-single-en.
Both websites were last viewed on 29 September 2007.

northern section of the island and the Sinhalese, who are predominantly Buddhist, controlled the South. In 1505 the Portuguese took possession of Ceylon until the Dutch India Company usurped control (1658–1796). The British took over in 1796 and Ceylon became an English Crown colony in 1802. The British compounded the problems by following a divide and rule policy, aggravating the tensions between the communities. Ceylon became independent of British rule in 1948, a few months after India and Pakistan became independent and the name Sri Lanka was adopted for the country. From the moment of independence, the Tamil people tried to achieve justice through democratic processes for 25 years.

S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike became Prime Minister in 1956 and championed Sinhalese nationalism, making Sinhala the country's only official language and including state support of Buddhism, further marginalizing the Tamil minority. He was assassinated in 1959 by a Buddhist monk. The Tamil minority's mounting resentment towards the Sinhalese majority's monopoly on political and economic power, exacerbated by cultural and religious differences, and led to bloody violence and pogrom against the Tamils in the southern provinces of the country.

In 1976, the Tamils opted for an independent Tamil State. The younger generation of Tamils became restless and took arms to fight for the creation of this independent state – the strongest of the rebel groups is the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam (LTTE) popularly known as Tamil Tigers. This stage of the war has been going on since 1983. There was a formal ceasefire with the Tamil rebels, signed in February 2002. In September 2002, the government lifted its ban on the group, and in December 2002 LTTE agreed to explore the possibilities for a viable solution within a federal structure, of power devolution as an alternative for an independent Tamil State. But the talks did not proceed beyond December, 2002, leading to further disillusionment of the Tamils. In 2005 Mahinda Rajapakse won the presidential elections.

To add fuel to the fire, the tremendously powerful tsunami that ravaged the Sri Lankan coast in December 2004 killed over 38,000 people. There was hope for peace as the government and the Tamil Tigers reached a deal in June 2005 to share about $4.5 billion in international aid to rebuild the country. But a verdict of the Sri Lankan Supreme Court jeopardized the aid package. In August 2005, the government declared a state of emergency. The Sri Lankan government continues to withhold the LTTE's share of the tsunami funds in the Central Bank of Sri Lanka.

The influence of the Buddhist monks has continued to dominate politics. In 2006, repeated violations of the 2002 ceasefire on both sides turned into outright war. Since April 2006, about 1,000 soldiers and civilians have been killed, and 350,000, mostly Tamils, have been displaced. Efforts by the government of Norway, which brokered the Oslo Peace Accord and ceasefire in 2002, to bring both sides to the negotiating table once again have been unsuccessful. Fighting between the rebels and government troops has continued into 2007. Earlier this year (2007), after a week of deadly battles, the military took control of rebel-held regions of eastern Sri Lanka (Vaharai – a place the Living Letter's Team visited) leaving tens of thousands more civilians displaced. The army shelling has destroyed the houses that had been built just 2 years earlier following the tsunami! In April this year, the Tamil Tigers

launched their first air raid, using small airplanes to bomb an air force base near Colombo. The present government pursues the conviction of a unitary form of government and does not support a form of power sharing or federalism that has been proposed. Many in the North and East of Sri Lanka do not approve of violence, but the LTTE is for them the only answer to their problems.

One of the strong forces seeking peace and reconciliation in Sri Lanka is the Interreligious Association for Peace. The Living Letters Team had the privilege to meet the executive committee of this group. The Rev. Fr. Dominic Saminathan, who chaired the meeting, said that Sri Lanka has many religions and it is not possible for people of any religion to live independent of the others. The challenge then has been for people of the different religions to accept and respect one another. They told us that the problem in Sri Lanka is one of 'Buddhist colonization' where people of one religion seek to dominate all others. For example, the people are forced to learn Sinhalese language and the names of roads and villages are being changed from Tamil to Sinhalese even in areas that are 100% Tamil. The tragedy is that the established government is part of this process of colonization. This is clear from the fact that all military people, all district secretaries, all commissioners and all assistant commissioners are Sinhalese. The Inter-Religious Association for Peace was formed to address the inter-religious situation in Sri Lanka as well as to resettle victims of the tsunami. It has one single objective and that is to establish peace in Sri Lanka.

The Sri Lankan experience indicates the need for inter-religious education. Since different religions provide the basis for violence, it is necessary to study many religions if peace is to be established. In view of the perspective of many Tamil leaders that the war in Sri Lanka is war against 'Buddhist colonization' one of the major recommendations of the Living Letters Team was that inter-religious dialogue be promoted. This presupposes inter-religious education. One would want to understand whether the accusation of 'Buddhist colonization' is accurate. If it is, how can it be when Buddhism is known for its claim to peace? If it is not, why is there this misinterpretation? Could there be a misunderstanding among religions? How could this be corrected for peace in Sri Lanka? Answers to such questions are critical for peace.

Another illustration indicates that even within one religion, religion may provide a basis for war. The world is yet to recover from the shock of the Rwandan genocide of 1994. Rwanda claims to be 70% Christian. Yet not even church buildings could provide refuge to victims of the genocide. On the contrary they were turned into sites of carnage. In the context of this paper the central questions one would ask are best expressed by Agatha Radoli (1998, Preface) thus:

> How could Catholics desecrate Christ's presence in the Blessed Sacrament by slaughtering their brothers and sisters in the churches? What drove them to such a degree of savagery that they could not even hear the cries of innocent children as they died in agony? Where did they throw the Christian values of love, forgiveness, faith, respect of human life, honesty, service, non-violence, respect of places of worship, sharing, justice, peace, reconciliation, etc? Can Christians in Rwanda really trust one another after what happened? Who will assist them in the reconciliation process since some of their pastors were also implicated in the genocide.

These are questions that one would find in the study of inter-religious education. The truth of the matter is

Church {read religious} leaders are often caught between their understanding and knowledge of the gospel of reconciliation and their ethnic ties and obligations. They must be encouraged to stand for the gospel which is above ethnic ties and to work for peace in their communities.[2]

Religion, in this case, Christianity, had the potential to control ethnic conflicts but it did not as members of various religions fell back to their ethnic identities. How ugly it is to imagine "priests killing members of their congregations who had sought refuge in Church buildings in the belief that the 'Reverend men and women of God' would protect them" (Kubai, 2005, p. 10).

Inter-religious education provides its students with lessons on how religions work to initiate and maintain violence contrary to their teachings, but also on how they work to foster peace and development. Such education is useful in indicating where religions went wrong and therefore guide people away from similar mistakes, but it would also bring out the positive values common in all religions that may be harnessed for peace at all levels.

International War/Terrorism

With its transcendent reference to 'hereafter', religion influences human behaviour in so strong a way that no other institution can. This is best illustrated in what has come to be popularly referred to as 9/11. The final report of the National Commission on the Terrorist Attacks (2002) upon the United States observes:

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 11, 2001, dawned temperate and nearly cloudless in the eastern United States. Millions of men and women readied themselves for work. Some made their way to the Twin Towers, the signature structures of the World Trade Center complex in the New York City. Others went to Arlington, Virginia, to the Pentagon. Across the Potomac River, the United States congress was back in session. At the other end of the Pennsylvania Avenue, people began to line up for a White House tour. In Sarasota, Florida, President George W. Bush went for an early morning run. For those heading to an airport, weather conditions could not have been better for a safe and pleasant journey. Among the travelers were Mohamed Atta and Abdul Aziz al Omari, who arrived at the airport in Portland, Maine.

This day was to remain a landmark in the history of humanity as the 9/11 attack on America. The damage done with respect to loss of lives, of property, not to mention the effects of the consequent declaration of war by America is difficult and very painful to imagine.

At the centre of the 9/11 attack was religion. Although Islam as presented in the Qur'an is a peaceful religion that does not advocate for war, Osama Bin Laden, who

---

[2]"Report on the Consultation on Ethnicity and Nationalism" hosted by the Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue in Colombo and the Christian Council of Sri Lanka, Nov 1994, in The Ecumenical Review, Vol 47, No. 2, April 1995; p. 229.

is identified as the leader of the Al Qaeda Group that took responsibility for the attack, uses Islam to justify the war against America. This war did not start with 9/11 though 9/11 marked a new war because it was the first time that America was being attacked by the Al Qaeda on its own soil. Throughout the preparations for the attack believed to have been carried out throughout the 1990s, Osama bin Laden repeatedly inspired his 'soldiers' to embrace martyrdom because in his own words: 'the walls of oppression and humiliation cannot be demolished except in a rain of bullets' (Bin Laden, cited in The 9/11 Commission Report, p.50–51).

Islam is not the only religion that was used to justify war between America and the Al Qaeda. Christianity was also. Speaking at the National Cathedral in Washington D.C., President Bush is reported to have said: 'Americans do not yet have the distance of history. But our responsibility to history is already clear: To answer these attacks and rid the world of evil'. The declaration was that America was at war and therefore its consequent war on terror was made from a church pulpit! This is significantly important especially because the declaration of war on terror divided the world into two: those for and therefore with America and those against America and therefore not with Bush. In the words of President Bush: 'Our enemy is a radical network of terrorists, and every government that supports them. . . . Every nation, in every region, now had a decision to make: either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.'[3]

Given such scenarios, inter-religious education is extremely necessary if peace is to be fostered. Although President Bush differentiated between Islam and Muslims on the one hand and Islamic terrorists on the other, the truth is that both Christianity and Islam had a major role to play in justifying both the 'attack upon America' and the 'war on terror'. It follows then that both religions have a major role to play in fostering peace between 'those for and those against America' throughout the world.

The Role of Inter-religious Education

Indisputably, religion is commonly associated with conflict and violence: in nearly all situations of violence and conflict in the world today religion is identified as a major factor. The previous section presented concrete illustrations of the role played by religion at all levels in initiating, perpetuating and justifying violence. As has already been mentioned in an earlier section of this chapter, this is ironic because major religions of the world claim to be in search for peace among humans. What this contradictory reality implies is that anyone interested in peace and development must essentially address the question of religion.

Inter-religious education seeks to equip learners with the histories, practices, beliefs and values of various religions of the world, with a basic objective of comparing the common points along which religions may engage in common thinking

---

[3]White house transcript, President Bush's Address to a Joint session of congress and to the American people, September 20, 2001, cited in The 9/11 Commission Report, p. 337.

and action towards common goals and mutual benefit. This section presents the role of inter-religious education in fostering peace and development in the world today by presenting the common challenges to all religions in view of their common experiences and the claimed common value of peace.

Writing on the role of religious education in peace building, Priestly (2007) argued that one does not need to study other religions except his/her own. For him learning about other peoples' religions does not add value to any effort for peace. I beg to differ. It is ignorance and misunderstanding of the 'other' that leads to the dichotomization of society into 'us' and 'them', the basis of all conflict and violence. As illustrated in the previous section, religion may be used to dichotomize society. In such situations, people identify those who belong to their religion as 'us' while identifying those of a different religion from one's own as 'them'. Due to the egoistic nature of human persons, 'us' are designated as superior and deserving better treatment than 'them'.

In Christianity for example, the concept of 'a chosen race, God's own people', presupposes that those who are not chosen are not God's own people, whether we think of the 'chosen race' as the Jews as implied in the Old Testament or as Christians as implied in the New Testament. The idea of Divine appointment gives weight to the importance of 'us' thereby justifying anything done in favour of 'us' and anything done against 'them'. Since the Divine is All Knowing, the people then believe that God can never be wrong about the importance of 'us' and therefore are inspired and determined in protecting 'us' from 'them'. It is no wonder then that religious and religious-associated wars are the most brutal through history.

The implication is that education about religions other than one's own reveals to individuals and individual groups that all religious people consider their own as the authentic religion and therefore they are the 'chosen people'. This realization makes people understand that they could be wrong in assuming that theirs is the only true religion while all others are wrong. Moreover, studying other religions reveals to individuals and individual groups that one's religion is not necessarily out of choice but rather destined. Such a realization is the basis of learning about other religions and therefore not judging them in ignorance.

I vividly remember the first lesson in my undergraduate class on comparative religion. My teacher, Professor E.M. Kasiera, asked each one of us in the class: 'What is your religion?' Many of us were Christians and we said so while a few were Muslims and they said so. Turning to the Christian students Professor Kasiera asked: 'What is your denomination?' I remember saying: 'I am a strict Presbyterian'. Then the Professor asked the next question: 'Did you choose to be a Presbyterian?' I proudly responded in the affirmative. My pride was brought down to nothing when the truth of the matter dawned on me. I was a Presbyterian not out of choice but because of past experiences that I had little or no control over. If I had been born to different parents in a different continent at a different time in history, it is unlikely that I would be a Presbyterian. He went on to explain why Presbyterians in Kenya are almost entirely of the kikuyu background because missionaries of the Church of Scotland basically settled in the central province limiting their missionary activity to the people around them.

No other lesson has had such an impact in my life as far as breaking down the wall I had created between 'us' Presbyterians and 'they' who at the time were limited to the Roman Catholics due to my limited exposure. Note that up to this time that I had not had close encounters with people of other 'faiths' other than Roman Catholics. The other 'faiths' being completely unknown to me were of no interest but the Roman Catholics were a little known to me only in as far as my fellow Presbyterians defined them as 'them', that is different from 'us' in a negative way. Since then a lot of experiences have transformed my Christian identity: Born and brought up as a strict Presbyterian, I later became a Roman Catholic by marriage so that today I fellowship in a Roman Catholic Church while my involvement in religious and inter-religious education makes me a Catholic by choice.

All religions have a common challenge to try and understand other religions particularly those with whom they interact. In the absence of interaction, not knowing the other is without much consequence. However, if one interacts with any group other than their own, it is necessary to understand the other, otherwise one will brand the other inferior leading to conflict. In a globalized world where interactions are no longer limited by time and space, inter-religious education is indispensable.

Inter-religious education reveals that there are common values in all religions and therefore one's own religion is not as unique as one perceives it. Further, inter-religious education reveals to individuals and individual groups the fact that one's own religion, like other religions, has made similar mistakes through history and therefore all face the same challenge, the challenge to deepen faith and translate this into action is common to all religions. It is for lack of deep faith that people including religious leaders find their ethnic, national, class and other ties stronger than their religious ties. In such circumstances, ethnic, national and class competition and struggles take precedence over religious beliefs. In fact religious beliefs are compromised or misinterpreted to suit other pursuits. This explains why many people claim to belong to certain religions and yet their practices do not resonate to what they claim to believe. As has already been presented in the preceding pages, if people truly followed the values of their religion there would be peace for all humanity.

Inter-religious education has a major role to play in preparing people for inter-religious dialogue which is the basis for addressing religious-associated violence in the world today. It is difficult for people from different religious backgrounds to dialogue if they do not have adequate knowledge of the 'other'. This presents all religions with a challenge to promote inter-religious education for inter-religious dialogue. It is necessary to acknowledge that there is significant development in inter-religious dialogue; religions are increasingly coming together to dialogue. However, not much action is coming from such dialogue as much of the time is spent talking. The challenge is for religions to move beyond what Landau calls 'talk-talk-talk cycle'(Landau, 2007) into practical action. Landau is accurate in his assertion that inter-religious dialogue groups are often 'dogged by religious and personality conflicts'. My contention is that such conflicts arise from lack of adequate knowledge of the other, which may be achieved through inter-religious education.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented the role of inter-religious education in promoting peace and development in the world today. The writer began by presenting the role of religion in war and conflict at various levels: family, community, national and international. Using illustrations from historical events from various parts of the world, religion was presented as a source, basis and justification of initiation and perpetuation of violence. Gender violence, religious violence, ethnic violence, civil violence and international violence were discussed in these illustrations.

Having thus shown the relationship between religion and violence, the next section presented the role of inter-religious education in fostering peace and development by identifying the common challenges to religion. These included the following:

 (i) the challenge to promote inter-religious education
 (ii) the challenge to deepen faith and therefore bridge the gap between faith and practice
(iii) the challenge to promote inter-religious dialogue that moves beyond talk to practical action for peace and development.

References

Brown, A. (1991). Apology to Women. Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 139.

ECA-WIDNET (1997). *Violence against women: Trainers manual*, Nairobi, Kenya: Pauline Publications.

Kabazzi, S. et al. (Eds.). (2000). *The Kanugu Cult-Saga: Suicide, Murder or Salvation*. Kampala, Uganda: The Department of Religious Studies, Makerere University.

Kubai A. (2005). *Being Church in Post genocide Rwanda: the challenges of forgiveness and reconciliation*. Uppsala, Sweden: Life and Peace institute.

Landau, R. M. (ed.).(2007). In *Interfaith Dialogue: the Source Book Source Book*. http://www.how-to-succeed-at-interfaith-dialogue.com/ visited on 25th Oct 2007

McTernan, O. (2003). *Violence in God's Name*: *The role of religion in an age of conflict*, New York: Orbis Books.

Mbiti, J. S. (1969). *African Religions and Philosophy*, Nairobi, Kenya: Heinemann.

O'dea T. F., & O'dea, J. A. (1993). The *sociology of religion. N*ew Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1993).

Priestley J. G. (2007). The peace that passes all secular understanding: facing religion and ourselves In Astley, J. et al. (Eds.) *Peace or violence: The ends of religion and Education* Cardiff: University of Wales press.

Radoli A. (1998). In Preface to Mario L. A.(ed.), *The call to deepen Christianity in Africa*. Eldoret, Kenya: AMECEA Gaba Publications.

Report on the Consultation on Ethnicity and Nationalism hosted by the Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue in Colombo and the Christian Council of SriLanka. Nov 1994, In *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol 47 No. 2 April 1995, p 229.

Silberschmidt, M. (1999). *Women forget that men are masters: Gender antagonism and socio-economic change in Kisii District, Kenya*, Stockholm, Sweden: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet.

The 9/11 Commission Report: The Final Report of the National Commission on the Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, N.D.

Van Leeuwen, M. S. (1990). G*ender and Grace: Women and the changing world*. Leicester: Intervarsity Press.